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SUBJECT: RAMADAN IN OMAN: SPIRITS ARE HIGH, BUT SO ARE PRICES

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Omanis are in a generally positive mood as Ramadan draws to a close. Seasonal goodwill, however, has been blemished by complaints of price increases on basic foodstuffs and other items. As elsewhere in the region, Omanis are watching Arabic-language serial programs on television produced especially for Ramadan, while the country's small Shia community may be increasingly tuning to media outlets backed by Iran and Hezbollah. The fledgling Oman Journalists' Association has provided an alternative to evening parties by sponsoring unprecedented public fora featuring presentations by government ministers. End Summary.

A POSITIVE MOOD

2. (U) The occasion of Ramadan tends to generate good feelings in Oman, and this year is no exception. Despite sobering events in other parts of the region, the mood at Ramadan gatherings is generally upbeat. The "hubta," a traditional village market set up sometime during the last week of Ramadan, is both the subject and venue of much conversation. More than a market, the hubta is a social event where Omanis - who use reduced work hours and the break in routine to reinforce personal relationships - go to mingle with friends and remember their traditions. According to some observers, an increasing number of young Omani women are venturing out in groups to smoke sheesha and enjoy the festive evening atmosphere.

ON THE AIRWAVES

3. (SBU) "Musalsallat," Arabic-language television programs appearing in daily installments, dominate the airwaves during Ramadan in Oman. This year, the Saudi program "Tash Matash" is a favorite of many viewers, with its depiction of social issues in the Arab world, including terrorism. Peak viewing time tends to be after the daily iftaar (evening meal that breaks the fast), although programs are repeated and run throughout the day. For news, many in Oman's Shia community are turning to the Iranian Arabic-language "Al-Alam" channel, as well as Lebanese Hezbollah's "Al-Manar." It is believed that the popularity of both channels has increased this year, in the wake of Israeli-Hezbollah combat over the summer. (Note: Omani Shia comprise no more than 5% of the population, are well integrated into Omani society, and in general hold no loyalty to Iran. End Note.)

GRUMBLING ABOUT PRICES

4. (SBU) One of the major topics of discussion during this Ramadan, and a primary source of complaints, is rising food prices,

particularly the cost of basic foodstuffs that are integral to Ramadan celebrations and the Eid al-Fitr holiday. Sporadic shortages of dairy products have added to grumbling. A kilo of meat that was 1.5 Omani Riyals (OR) before Ramadan could rise to 2.4 OR, with select cuts going for as much as 3.2 OR. (Note: Four major meat distributors, all owned by government officials, effectively dominate the Omani market. Meat vendors view the seasonal spike in demand as an opportunity to boost profits. End Note.) As in previous years, prices also have risen for fish, chicken, coffee, sugar, rice, flour, fruits and vegetables, though they are expected to gradually decrease after the Eid. As a result, some consumers are settling for cheaper goods like dry, salted fish as they try to save money for the next big holiday, the Eid al-Hajj (Eid al-Adha). The food price increases are magnified by other holiday expenses such as the tradition of buying new clothing, receiving visitors, and funding extra entertainment for the household. Omanis grouse that traditional Ramadan promotions on everything from automobiles to trinkets are noticeably less generous than in the past.

AWAY FROM MUSCAT

15. (U) In provincial towns like Salalah in the far south, food shortages and price rises tend to be felt more acutely than in Muscat, since there are no large supermarkets and sellers' supplies often cannot meet demand. This is offset somewhat, however, by the small farms and livestock owned by Omanis outside the capital area, which provide an alternate source of milk and meat. An additional headache reported by many outside Muscat is irregular business hours, which make shopping difficult. Some speculate that a shortage of Omani workers in the retail sector, caused in part by the government's "Omanization" program, may be one reason for shortened and inconvenient store hours. Omani employees with young

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children and heavy family obligations are also less disposed to keep long hours at their place of business. In contrast, some businesses in Muscat, including the Sultan Center - one of the larger supermarkets - are open 24-hours daily during the holiday.

JOURNALISTS HOLD FORA

16. (U) One new development this Ramadan is the growing activism of the fledging Omani Journalist Association (OJA). The OJA has conducted well-received public forums with the Ministers of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Commerce & Industry about 2007 elections for the Majlis al-Shura (reftel), international relations, and the newly signed U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement (septel), respectively.

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